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ABSTRACT

Immigrant people have positive internal forces to survive in a new environment. Sometimes the symptoms of stress resulting from migration are mistakenly treated as symptoms of deeper psychopathology, particularly when cultural conflicts are part of the stress. Catholic Family Services offers counseling services for Hispanics which are sensitively tailored to fit into their patterns of relationships, enabling Hispanics to make a positive transition into the community and helping the community to accept and appreciate Hispanic cultural strengths. Stressful factors for Puerto Rican families include the inability to speak English or to read and write well in Spanish, change from a rural area to a new climate in an urban setting, the alienation caused by children's schools, and difficulties in employment. Counselors must accept the traditional family role structure and understand that the families do not see themselves as needing counseling. However, families may want help with concrete needs such as finding housing. Besides building a trust relationship with families, two types of groups have proved effective in helping Hispanics. The first type of group offers socialization skills training to children referred by schools, campus, or parents. The second type is an innovative group and outreach program for adults to help overcome stress and promote family and community bonding in newly arrived families of middle school aged children. Many families are able to reconnect with their own competence and resources; others use these groups as a bridge to traditional therapy. (ABL)

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THERAPEUTIC SERVICES FOR HISPANIC FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

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Therapeutic Services for Hispanic Families in Transition

Immigrant people have positive internal forces to survive in a new environment. This is demonstrated when they come to a new place to meet needs which are unmet in their original countries. However, any migration in itself produces particular stresses for individuals and families. In the case of Puerto Ricans coming to the mainland, it brings special ambiguities and ambivalence on both sides.

New situations produce symptoms that cannot be resolved without mutual understanding and appreciation of differences, as well as knowledge of services available. Sometimes the symptoms of stress are mistakenly treated as symptoms of deeper psychopathology, particularly when cultural conflicts are part of the stress.

Catholic Family Services offers counseling services for Hispanics which are sensitively tailored to fit into their patterns of relationships. We have evolved an outreach program to make services more accessible and serve a broad range of needs of Hispanic families, enabling them to make a positive transition into the community and helping the community to accept and appreciate the cultural strengths they bring.

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The program began in 1970 when a part-time outreach worker came to assess needs of the growing Hispanic population while going to homes and schools to offer counseling available through the Agency. Although services were provided in Spanish, they were not readily utilized on

the traditional model of coming into the office for appointments scheduled over several weeks. Therefore a comprehensive program has evolved tailored to particular cultural styles, frequently providing interviews in the homes. Often child care and transportation are arranged if needed in order to receive services.

The approaches developed are based on an underlying assumption that persons coming to a new environment have personal strengths and come because they want to gain something by participating in the new culture. Further, migration is viewed as a stressful situation which can, and often does, undermine family cohesiveness and usual coping patterns. It is important not to assume at the out set that hostility, family conflict and alienation are pathological and require psychotherapy, although therapeutic (healing) intervention is needed for the entire family.

Puerto Ricans who come to New Britain are often poor, have lived in rural areas and have not been able to attain a high level of formal education. Many do not speak English and often do not read and write fluently in Spanish. They are overwhelmed by the climate and urban setting. The school quickly becomes an alienating factor in their family structure. Among other things, children learn English and must be relied upon to interpret for their parents. Children face expectations in school and with peers which begin to threaten the family power structure, undermining parental authority and control, already vulnerable from the difficulties of obtaining employment and coping with other

unforeseen stresses. Because unskilled work is less and less available and today's migrants often do not qualify for the jobs that are available, traditional family roles are difficult to maintain. The importance of "machismo" in the Hispanic culture must be recognized and respected if counselors are to be trusted. All members of the family, including extended family, generally must accept the counselor and support the relationship if therapeutic change in the family is to take place.

These families do not see themselves as needing "counseling" when that means telling their problems to outsiders and becoming more vulnerable. They may, however, want "help" to meet specific concrete needs such as difficulties with welfare, utility companies, housing or school. The counselor helps with these problems with the goal of increasing the client's knowledge of the community, how the systems work, building skills to cope with new systems in order to foster independence and connectedness with the new environment. They may introduce them to other resources such as ESL classes and job-seeking programs. These are more readily accepted when offered in this context and when the counselor maintains supportive contact. Often these interventions pave the way for more traditional individual, marital or family therapy, if it is needed, when a level of trust has been established and family survival needs have been stabilized.

While all counseling services are provided by professionals in a professional relationship, it is also important that the professional be viewed as part of the

extended cultural network if trust is to be established at a level on which intimate personal or family feelings and problems can be explored.

In addition to building trust and a "friendly professional" relationship through helping to cope with crisis and survival needs, two groups have proved particularly effective in helping Hispanic families who are adjusting to their transition with difficulty. For several years the Agency has provided groups, often bi-lingual, to children referred by schools, camp or parents. These run for a school year, offering socialization skills and help with school and family relationships, including problems of discrimination and abuse. Parents are seen individually before the groups start and periodically during the year. They are also encouraged to attend sessions for parents addressing such needs as parenting skills, and adjustment to divorce. Hispanic children and their parents participate increasingly in this program, frequently attaining a comfortable level of coping. If their stresses continue to mount, they frequently have attained a level of trust which enables them to use individual and/or family counseling to work on their special problems. Such counseling is typically short-term and problem focussed. It may take place in several short series of interviews, each focussing on a particular problem or relationship.

As we continued to see more and more Spanish speaking families in the services described above, it became clear that a very high proportion of the problems we were seeing

involved disruption of relationships in families, predominantly female-headed, in which the children were perceived as out of control and the parent(s) felt overwhelmed, discouraged and increasingly lacking in self-esteem. Even when parental trust had been gained by helping children in groups, it seemed that it would be more effective if parents could be helped in their own groups to build their self-esteem through learning about the schools and community and learning parenting skills to empower them as parents who could support their children's progress in bonding positively to the community.

Lack of basic community information and connections generate considerable stress and eventual failure when children cannot obtain support from their parents and the parents get progressively angry because their children do not respect their judgement. Entrada is an innovative group and outreach program to help overcome stress and promote family and community bonding in newly arrived families of middle school aged children. It begins with an "orientation" session at which parents meet and hear representatives of community institutions with which they frequently interact but with which they often feel frustrated and inadequate, such as school, welfare, clinic. They hear how welcome and important their participation is and how they can surmount the language barrier. They hear rationale for certain policies such as school attendance, which seem confusing and alien. At the end of the orientation session parents are offered the opportunity to participate in 20 group sessions over 10 weeks which will

increase their knowledge and skills to connect to significant community resources as well as skills to strengthen bonds with their children and maintain their leadership in the family. PECES, a Spanish translation of the STEP parenting program, is used. Cultural stresses are discussed to help understand realistically the difficulties of transition and develop positive strategies to maintain their cultural values and traditions while striving to obtain the positive benefits for which they came. Together they find ways to add to and enrich their lives rather than sacrificing their identity. They often learn a second language, but that does not mean abandoning their first. They can take pride in that. Self esteem grows as they become empowered in family and community, enriching family relationships.

Entrada includes a research component. Results are still being evaluated, but show positive gains for participating families. Many parents have gone on to learn English, to find jobs and to value themselves more as parents. Schools have been enthusiastic and have requested the program be extended to earlier grades.

Some families seek individual or family therapy after participating in these programs. However, many others whose functioning might have appeared to require treatment are able to see quickly that they can make a difference in the lives of their children, thereby reconnecting with their own strongest side and getting in touch with the kind of competence and resources which enabled them to migrate and express hope for themselves and their families. This proves to be therapeutic for stressed families.

For Hispanic families or individuals who need traditional therapy, this approach is often a bridge to make counseling acceptable in a bi-lingual bi-cultural setting.